

REAL

Yearbook of
Research in English and American
Literature

Volume 31 (2015)

Reading Practices

Edited by
Winfried Fluck, Günter Leypoldt
and Philipp Löffler

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General Editors
Tobias Döring · Winfried Fluck
Herbert Grabes · Donald E. Pease

31

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Notice to Contributors

The editors invite submissions of manuscripts appropriate to the topics of the forthcoming volumes of REAL. The 2016 volume, edited by Ingo Berensmeyer, Herbert Grabes, and Ansgar Nünning, will be on „Literature and Cultural Change.“ The 2017 volume, edited by Sarah Fekadu, Isabel Kranz and Tobias Döring, will be on „Meteorologies of Modernity: Weather and Climate Discourses in the Anthropocene.“ Each author will receive one copy of the yearbook and a pdf file of the article. Articles submitted for consideration may be sent directly to the volume editors or via an advisor. They should reach the volume editors by December 1 of the year prior to publication, and should not exceed 10,000 words (including endnotes and references). To facilitate processing, they should be sent in duplicate and on cd or disc; they must be typed in English, doublespaced, and should observe the conventions laid down in the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2003 sqq.).

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Günter Leypoldt, Philipp Löffler, Winfried Fluck

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PHILIPP LÖFFLER

Introduction: Reading in the Age of Academic Literary Studies

I. The History of Reading and the History of Literature

The institutionality of literature has been at the center of literary-historical scholarship for a number of years now.¹ It still seems, however, that this interest has not produced full-fledged alternatives to the dominant practice of literary historiography. Standard works, such as the *Norton* and *Heath* anthologies, invite us to see the history of art and literature as a series of mediated responses to world history at large, unfolding in more or less linear time (from the Early Republic, say, to Postmodernism and beyond). The tradition invoked by these works goes back to early Romantic identity models following the “expressivist turn” and has been dominant in a variety of cultural and literary histories since the early nineteenth century.² While the expressive response model of literary history has been crucial to an important political turn in literary criticism (significant not least because it triggered

¹ This interest is reflected in broad institutional histories, such as Richard Ohman’s *English in America* (1976), Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature* (1987), John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* (1993), and, most recently, Ted Underwood’s *When Literary Periods Mattered* (2013). But there are also a number of influential studies dedicated to particular historical periods and contexts of writings. Prominent examples would be Cathy Davidson’s *Revolution and the Word* (1986), Michael Warner’s *The Letters of the Republic* (1990), Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books* (1997), Nancy Glazener’s *Reading for Realism* (1997), James English’s *The Economy of Prestige* (2005), Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era* (2009), and Amy Hungerford’s *Postmodern Belief* (2010).

² The “expressivist turn” describes a number of simultaneous efforts in late eighteenth-century literary-historical discourse to define the value of art as a manifestation of distinct cultures rather than by the artwork’s proximity to a universal aesthetic or moral ideal. This tradition can be traced in a number of works in European intellectual culture, beginning with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s sentimentalist conception of nature as a voice within, Johann Gottfried Herder’s notion of a folk culture, the literary nationalism of the Schlegel brothers, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s history of aesthetics. The transatlantic dimension of this debate is reflected prominently in a number of early nineteenth-century literary-philosophical movements in the US, among them the New England Transcendentalists around Ralph Waldo Emerson and the more conservative ‘School Room’ poets around Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and William Cullen Bryant. For a comprehensive discussion of the “expressivist turn” see Taylor, 368-390. For a more specifically American perspective on this debate and its intellectual contexts see Buell, 3-102.

important interventions into the literary canon debates),³ it tends to obscure important questions about the different modes and values of literary production and the phenomenology of reading: What, for instance, do authors have to accomplish to become artistically relevant within the community of writers and readers they work in? How, for instance, is the economic success or failure of their books connected to their retroactive consecration as culturally significant objects? Where do such moments of consecration take place and how are they authorized? How important is the relationship between academic and non-academic gate-keeping institutions (e.g. book clubs, *The New York Times Book Review*, the Pulitzer Prize, Oprah Winfrey) for our understanding of what counts as valuable? In what ways have academic reading practices contributed to the emergence of artistic/literary avant-gardes? How have they influenced debates about the proper uses of literature (for example, reading for hermeneutic meaning or a “politics” of form rather than for “enchantment,” cathartic pleasure, or therapeutic self-culture)? Finally, how can literary studies still legitimize its own professional practices in light of the revisionist shifts the field has undergone since the 1960s?

A socio-institutional history of literature complements the linear time lines of traditional literary historiography with a spatial dimension of a literary field and its institutions. It thus allows for inquiries into the specific loci of literary production and its various scales of value (for example, avant-garde poetry vs. mass-marketable crime fiction, serious middle-brow fiction vs. academically consecrated standards of excellence). The present volume of essays is based on a broad understanding of literary institutionality and seeks to address in particular the impact of academic reading on twentieth-century literary history. Central to all essays is the observation that the twentieth-century academicization of literary criticism in the US has solidified a hierarchy of higher and lower forms of readerly practice that effectively define the values and functions of the literary as such – both within and without the confines of the university. In other words: this collection of essays explores how US research universities were able to become central in classifying literatures and readerships according to a socially binding system of literary taste-sensibilities.

The age of academic literary studies – alluded to by this volume’s title – may thus be considered to be shaped by the “culture of the school” (Guillory 1993, 37), a semi-autonomous taste-making formation whose tacit rules explain why some uses of literature and some types of literature come to seem right or wrong – or better or worse – than others.⁴ In this sense, the present

³ For comprehensive accounts of these political turns see, for example, Radway 2002; Lauter; Fluck 2009, and Fluck’s contribution to this volume.

⁴ Guillory’s terminology combines Marxist materialist categories with a Bourdieud-derived sociology of art, and it is useful in particular to differentiate historically and institutionally the fields in which particular literary texts become valuable while others fade into oblivion. As all of the contributions to this volume maintain, however, such value hierarchies reflect varying degrees of institutional prestige and historically specific conceptions of literary craft, rather than universalist ideals of literary greatness or truth.

volume investigates the proliferation of different reading and writing practices in the US not primarily as direct results of key events and transitions in world history (for example, the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam) but in conjunction with twentieth-century shifts in third-level education and literary institutions – the spread of academic literary studies, the growing influence of literary theory and criticism since the 1960s, the growth of college-educated readerships, and the institutionalization of university-based networks of patronage.⁵

Such institutionalized spaces and practices may of course also reflect broader cultural movements and historical shifts. The “humanities revolution” (Menand 2010, 59-92) of the postwar decades was in fact enabled in large parts by the rapidly expanding university system and corresponding structural and political changes in the US educational system between the 1940s and 1960s (for example, the G.I. Bill in 1944, Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, the Higher Education Act in 1965). Yet, as Guillory cautions, what “is transmitted by the school, is, to be sure, a kind of culture; but it is *the culture of the school.*” The school projects “an imaginary cultural unity never actually coincident with the culture of the nation-state” (38). The essays in this volume take seriously this notion of institutional semi-autonomy in order to show how the manifest differences between reading cultures today relate to specific fields of practices or social locations, and how claims about the constituents of legitimate reading translate into claims about cultural authority, that is, about what sort of embodied practice, affective economy, or taste is associated with society’s cultural center.

II. Professional Reading and the Rise of Academic Literary Criticism

The extension of the university and the emergence of a school culture in the postwar period have redefined the value of reading as a social practice; the growing influence of academic reading communities has raised questions not only about the purpose of reading, but also about how we read, and what we should or should not read. These distinctions of course did not emerge for the first time in the twentieth century. Literary competence has been talked about in the terms of taste acquisition for centuries. In the US, debates about the most appropriate uses of literature arose in the late eighteenth century as the result of two entwined developments: the professionalization of literature and the rise of literary nationalism.⁶ Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries literary value was then “largely defined within the high-cultural networks of a public sphere (connecting

⁵ Mark McGurl’s account of the rise of creative writing in the postwar university (“Planet MFA”) presents one of the most nuanced discussions of how academy-based networks of patronage have shaped the literary landscapes of the postwar decades in the US and beyond. See in particular Part I of McGurl’s *The Program Era*, 127-181.

⁶ For very useful accounts of early literary professionalism see Charvat 3-48; Lanzendörfer 9-32; Evelev 1-21; Leyppoldt “Aesthetic Specialists”.

academies, museums, art and music associations, and learned societies with various literary establishments).⁷ The rise of academic English Studies in the twentieth century shifted the currencies of literary value from a high-cultural public sphere towards university-based scholarly criticism, without, however, abandoning the value-based stratification of different reading practices.

The first larger set of questions this special issue aims to address concerns institutional shifts and practices within the university itself: How do literary scholars differ from other people when they read? What exactly qualifies as scholarly reading? Why is reading in a classroom different from reading at the beach? How does reading the late work of James Joyce compare to reading the final Harry Potter novel? Underlying these questions is the central distinction between professional readers, on the one hand, and lay readers, on the other, that is, between those who are paid for reading and do so in a more serious fashion, and those who might have a number of non-professional uses for texts: reading for therapy, for pleasure, for entertainment, for instruction, or for edification.

Historically, academic literary criticism gained authority in the wake of controversies between so-called scholars and critics in the first half of the twentieth century.⁸ As Timothy Aubry proposes in his essay “The Discipline of Feeling,” the rise of the New Critics in the 1920s and 1930s must be viewed as a first serious attempt to disentangle literature as an autonomous field from the hegemony of science, and to establish criticism as a standardized language to approach the literary artwork. Aubry shows how the New Critics “devised a series of systematic principles and critical procedures aimed at lending rigor to the practice of criticism,” and thus countering the historical and biographical studies of nineteenth-century literary scholars. Merve Emre expands on Aubry’s historical perspective by discussing F.O. Matthiessen’s memoir *From the Heart of Europe* to trace the transatlantic outreach of American literary criticism. Her essay “Fulbright Love” discusses how English Departments and study abroad programs, such as Fulbright, helped to institutionalize a mostly Whitman-based notion of literary Americanness designed “to rescue Eastern European civilization from the damage done to it by World War II.” Emre emphasizes the transnational dimension of academic literary criticism at mid-century, contextualizing the ideological uses of critical discourse at the dawn of the Cold War period.

⁷ Leyboldt, “Shifting Meridians” 769. The most influential study on the rise of an autonomous public sphere, emerging in the early eighteenth century and then significantly shaping nineteenth-century intellectual culture in the West, has been Jürgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). For the connection between the rising public sphere, early professionalized print cultures, and reading in the US see Warner 1-33; Dowling 1-16.

⁸ For the historical context of this debate see Graff, 121-144, and Timothy Aubry’s contribution to this volume.

III. The Impact of Literary Theory

Even though debates about the functions of academic literary criticism began in the early twentieth century, the real breakthrough of academic reading occurred with the rise of literary theory in the 1960s and 1970s and the subsequent ‘Americanization’ of continental critical theory at Yale and Berkeley.⁹ Journals, such as *New Literary History* (1969), *Diacritics* (1971), *Critical Inquiry* (1974), *Semiotexte* (1974), *Glyph* (1978), and *Representations* (1983), promoted this shift in exemplary fashion. The “theory journal” itself became a distinct instrument for structuring an expanding Humanities market on the basis of verifiable, quality-based standards of academic practice.¹⁰ The vision of objectified academic excellence reflected by the rise of the “theory journal” generated a variety of different reading postures, each of which endowed with higher and lower values in the academic reading world – suspicious reading vs. naïve reading, reading for form in contrast to reading for content, reading with a critical distance as opposed to reading with affective interest. The corresponding uses of literature could in turn be judged on the basis of the consequent distinction between professional and lay readers.

In other words: the twentieth-century university enabled the production of literary sense-making categories designed to translate the mere intuition that some reading practices are more valuable than others as the objectified expression of a particular professional identity: that of the academic literary critic. And in as much as academic literary criticism has become an increasingly influential cultural practice throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the act of reading itself, that is, the question of what happens when we read has been examined from a growing number of different theoretical and historical perspectives (from book history and sociology to phenomenology and reader-response studies to the more recent neuro-scientific models and digital technologies).

The contributions of Dustin Breitenwischer, Paul Armstrong, and Amy Hungerford offer three in-depth studies that all attest to the gradual diversification of literary theory since the 1970s. Breitenwischer argues for the particularity of aesthetic experiences in a discussion of what he calls “reading in-between.” Following the literary anthropology of Wolfgang Iser, Breitenwischer

⁹ We may think here of the 1966 Humanities conference (“Critical Languages and the Science of Man”) at Johns Hopkins as a crucial watershed in the history of academic reading. The 1966 conference brought leading European intellectuals, such as Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Tzvetan Todorov, to the US, and thus helped to introduce central paradigms of the Structuralist movement into US academic literary and cultural theory. The emergence of the Yale critics and, later, the New Historicists at Berkeley may be read as institutionally mediated responses to the event. The papers of the Johns Hopkins event in addition with prefatory remarks about the significance of the event were published by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato in 1971 under the title *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. See especially the opening chapter “In-between – 1971.”

¹⁰ For a discussion of this shift in the publication system see Jeffrey J. Williams’ “The Rise of the Theory Journal.”

defines the aesthetic as an infinitely open space that emerges between and in fact incorporates readers and texts. Reading, for Breitenwischer, is the *raison d'être* of perception as such. It is a general mode of sense-making that treats the aesthetic as a paradigmatic play space." Armstrong's "How Historical is Reading" discusses a broad array of neuro-scientific approaches to reading that he contrasts with contextualist models used by book historians and literary sociologists and phenomenological models in the wake of Husserl. Unlike Breitenwischer, Armstrong questions the singularity of the aesthetic, proposing that scholars will have to take seriously and combine a number of traditionally distinct theoretical perspectives to provide a full account of what reading really means. Aesthetic experiences "may feel 'special,'" as he claims, while also insisting that "we read Shakespeare with the same cortical functions and anatomy that supported hunting and gathering on the African savannah." Amy Hungerford's essay "GPS Historicism," finally, offers a foray into the world of digital literatures, exploring what it means when a (digital) "novel knows where you are standing while you read it" and what the consequences of that type of knowledge could be for the act of reading literature. Using the digital novel *The Silent History* as her case study, Hungerford claims that the new reading practices generated by the new medium will have a dramatic effect on the ways we conceive of literary history, and she also ponders the question what it means when writing a novel requires not only artistic talent but also technical skill.

An obvious if often disregarded consequence of academic reading concerns the business of organizing literary history according to genres and periods. Academically sanctioned reading practices go hand in hand with relatively specific expectations about literature. When we read we expect novels, poems, dramatic texts, or essays to function in particular ways. Teaching and studying literature in the university class-room standardizes these expectations in the sense of establishing formalized genre conventions and corresponding literary periods or movements. Classes on the 'Postmodernist Novel,' for example, 'The Elizabethan Sonnet,' or 'The Nineteenth-Century Short Story' provide assumptions about what these texts should entail, what they are supposed to look like, and what their message should be. Such labels, in short, reflect how scholars read as they organize literary history according to periods, genres, styles, and movements. This point is taken up in Philipp Löffler's essay "Identity Fiction and the Rise of Literary Theory." His essay shows that the political underpinnings of much minority writing in the wake of the Civil Rights movement gained momentum during the 1970s and 1980s primarily in conjunction with university-based debates about the function of literary theory, particularly reader-response models and deconstruction. The nomenclatures of literary periodization do not simply reflect a natural historical system of artistic forms. Rather, they are acquired and rehearsed within the institutional structures of modern English Departments, devised to authorize the requirements of curricula and standardized exam procedures.

IV. Readerships and Canons

These intra-systemic mechanisms are of course not completely detached from the world at large. As academic reading has defined professional literary study it has at the same time also influenced other forms of reading that are located beyond the frameworks of the academy (e.g. reading crime fiction on your daily commute to work, reading the latest John Irving on the beach in your summer vacation, reading holocaust memoirs as a form of moral education). Amy Blair's essay "Tasting and Testing Books" provides a case in point, discussing how early-twentieth-century women's magazines in the US, such as *Good Housekeeping*, became central institutions for establishing a middle-class literary canon in contrast or in opposition to the academic elitism practiced by the New Critics at around the same time. As Blair's essay underlines, the value of particular reading practices are defined by their perceived proximity to or distance from centers of cultural authority, such as the university – regardless of how trivial or melodramatic the purposes of reading are. And in that sense, the professional/lay distinction has become crucial for creating group coherence among readers not just within but also outside of the university.

Christa Buschendorf's essay "Reading Matters" continues Blair's discussion by examining how Afro-Americans appropriated a white literary canon in order to gain cultural recognition and to fight the constraints of a racially segregated intellectual field. In five case studies (Richard Wright, Maya Angelou, Ishmael Reed, Edgar Wideman, and Gloria Naylor), Buschendorf explores the uses of William Shakespeare as a politically and culturally significant object of reading, examining how the "acquisition of literary taste in the black writer's intellectual socialization as well as the subsequent canon debates are part of a necessarily relational process that is always already referring to the white dominant culture."

The question here is of course not only whether there can be a canon of books that everyone or only a few should read. Even more importantly, the question of what people read has to do with the cultural authority that comes with some readers' memberships of specific groups. Some people like to be caught reading high theory; others do not care about their public appearance as readers. Some find it intellectually 'unhealthy' to read genre fiction, even if they sometimes like it, and then some do not read at all, while yet others – the "reading class" – spend most of their free time reading.¹¹ What we read and how we read indicates our audience membership, and each audience requires different readerly commitments. The mechanisms that produce different reading audiences and their membership requirements are informed directly by the transmission of values by central cultural and social institutions. The ways in which these mechanisms work are the subject of Wendy Griswold and Hannah Wohl's contribution "Evangelists of Culture." The authors illustrate the "outreach efforts" of the reading class in order to convert people to reading. Based on broad sociological data of US readerships, the

¹¹ Cf. Griswold 36-69.

essay shows that while the university has been central within the “front line of culture,” it is also correlated with a network of other socially influential taste-making institutions (for example, schools, book clubs, public libraries) that determine how and what people read.

V. Gate-Keeping Institutions, Charisma, Conversion

One way of approaching the problem of distinguishing reader groups, their readerly commitments, and their social locations is to look at the relationship between academic and non-academic gate-keeping institutions. The reading lists of English Departments tend to feature consecrated, prize-winning fiction (the Booker Prize or the Nobel prize would be important indicators), which makes for a different list of books than we would find on, for example, the *New York Times Book Review*. How can we account for these differences? At first sight, these differences seem to indicate different uses of literature and corresponding practices of reading that are simply not compatible. Therapeutic reading à la Oprah Winfrey may be far away from advanced theory seminars in graduate schools, and yet there are popular examples – we may think of Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, or Jonathan Franzen – where such distinctions become conspicuously blurry and several audiences or disciplines seem to overlap. Novels such as *Paradise* and *The Corrections* (and obviously many more) conjoin several reading worlds and their incorporated practices despite their more obvious institutional and social disparity.¹² Günter Leyboldt’s discussion of the “Oprah Effect” – based on the Princeton-Episode of *Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club* – presents a conspicuous example. Leyboldt reveals how one and the same novel (or in fact any art work) can attain “higher” and “lower” bodies depending on the social location of its audience and the relevant institutions for promoting the novel’s or artwork’s use. His essay thus illustrates where and under what circumstances oppositions between distinct audiences collapse and where such moments of collapse create new and often unlikely readerly alliances.

A similar phenomenon is explored in Jan Stievermann and Daniel Silliman’s “Reading the Supernatural in Contemporary Christian and Ethnic Fiction.” The authors show how the appropriation of the supernatural helps to solidify the structures of two reader communities that would seem hardly compatible at first sight: that of popular evangelical fiction and that of postwar and contemporary ethnic minority fiction. The supernatural informs various uses of literature at the same time, oscillating between different reading goals (for example, religious conversion vs. ethnic identity formation) and different reading institutions (for example white Christian middle class audiences vs. ethnically and religiously diverse university class rooms). Whereas the critical acclaim for ethnic fantastic literature – and the rather mixed critical reception of evangelical fiction – may be reduced to the

¹² For instructive discussions of this phenomenon see Leyboldt’s essay in this volume and Aubry 2006.

question of literary quality, Silliman and Stievermann suggest a different explanation: “The networks of institutions that produce and support these texts, and establish the interpretive communities that define them, seem more important in shaping the critical responses of academics than any actual textual features.”

VI. The Politics of Reading

A final set of questions explored by the contributors to this volume concerns the political dimension that some reading practices may or may not take on. Reading and writing will always be embedded within larger social and political environments, without, however, simply reproducing them. In order to illustrate the complex relation between politics, on the one hand, and the logic of readerly discourses, on the other, this book also looks at the invention of a “politics” or “ethics of reading” with a particular focus on the gradual politicization of the academy since the 1960s. Winfried Fluck’s essay “Shadow Aesthetics” discusses this phenomenon in exemplary fashion. Fluck examines three major shifts in the institutional history of American studies since the 1940s, revealing that the field has been in perpetual need to authorize its existence from within its very own disciplinary confines – sometimes in correspondence with and sometimes in opposition to a politically pervasive *Zeitgeist*. Insisting on the distinctly aesthetic uses of the literary artwork as a “de-pragmatized object,” Fluck’s essay highlights a set of questions that are central to this special issue in general: How is what we do within academic reading circles related to – or relevant to – what we do beyond them? Is there a connection between the politically inspired liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Civil Rights, The Free Speech Movement, Gay Liberation after Stonewall) and, for instance, the institutionalization of deconstruction as a critical paradigm? Or, more broadly: how does the institutional history of the English Department correlate with the larger shifts in twentieth-century US political history?

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WINFRIED FLUCK

Shadow Aesthetics

What do Literary Studies do?

Ever since literary studies was defined as a field of study in its own right and institutionalized at colleges and universities, the field had to grapple with questions of legitimation. I am thinking not so much of attacks by natural scientists who questioned the field's status as a science, or of die-hard positivists and empiricists in the social sciences who questioned how literary scholars could ever hope to provide hard evidence for such elusive concepts as aesthetic value or aesthetic experience. I am thinking of the challenges, often voiced from within the field, what the relevance of the field is. Ever since I was a student in the 1960s, these debates have stood at the center of the field, which explains why I have returned repeatedly in my own work to questions about the function of literature and the changing functions of fiction.

The Hegelian Answer

When I look at literary studies from this perspective, I see three major stages in the self-legitimation of literary studies. The first may be called Hegelian and was long the dominant paradigm for the study of literature and for its justification as a field of study in higher education.¹ From a Hegelian perspective, questions about the relevance of literature are easy to answer, since the literary text embodies the spirit of its time² and can thus be taken as a supreme expression of a national or regional identity, or, in the Marxist

¹ Hegelianism also stands at the beginning of the discipline of art history. On the constitutive role of Hegelianism in the formation and institutionalization of the humanities see my essays on "Transatlantic Narratives about American Art" and "Surface Readings and Symptomatic Readings."

² More precisely, human history is the process of a gradual self-recognition of the universal spirit that manifests itself in different cultures and nations at different times. In "Transatlantic Narratives About American Art," I have provided a description of the three central assumptions on which a Hegelian approach is based: 1) the assumption that art can be read as a historical manifestation and significant cultural expression of a nation, society or particular group; 2) the claim that art is an instrument of self-recognition of that nation, society or group and can thus provide superior insights into their identity; 3) the assumption that the historical development of art is organized by unifying principles that give certain historical or social formations their characteristic identity. The challenge for the interpreter therefore consists in identifying this unifying principle, often called the "spirit" of a nation or period.

appropriation of Hegelianism, of the spirit of capitalism or of a particular class identity. These Hegelian claims were ideally suited, not only to justify the study of literature, but to put it at the center of a humanistic education. Expressing the inner spirit of a particular historical or social formation – such as, for example, of the Renaissance or of “America” or of the American South or of the middleclass – the literary text gains national or social representativeness and becomes something like a key to understanding a nation, region or social formation. In effect, not only a key, but a privileged key, because the study of literature offered two advantages that strongly recommended it for a liberal arts curriculum. Not only could one circumvent the otherwise complex and cumbersome study of historical or social formations by focusing on one of their representative self-expressions. This turn – for example to the study of a nation through its representative texts – also held the promise of a deeper understanding than social or empirical studies could provide.³ For as an expression of the spirit of a nation or particular region, the representative literary text provided something like a condensation of the essential features of this formation, that is, a key medium of self-recognition. To study a nation through its representative literary texts thus also promised to gain a deeper understanding of that nation since, as a condensed articulation of its essential spirit, the literary text or the work of art could bring us closer to the true spirit of a nation than any other form of expression.

Hegelianism in American Studies

In American Studies, this line of argumentation can be found in exemplary fashion in the founding period of the field. Much of the work of this period stands in the tradition of intellectual history and is firmly grounded in an underlying Hegelianism, although I suspect that many, if not most, American scholars were not necessarily aware of this philosophical underpinning. The basic assumptions of Hegelianism seemed so self-evident and were so readily

³ In the formative years of American Studies, this promise of a “deeper” understanding was a regular feature of theoretical reflections on the theory and method of American studies. Formalism is considered inadequate to help us understand American culture, but so is sociology. See, for example, Henry Nash Smith: “We are no better off if we turn to the social sciences for help in seeing the culture as a whole. We merely find society without art instead of art without society. The literary critic would cut esthetic value loose from social fact; the social scientist, despite his theoretical recognition that art is an important aspect of culture, uses techniques of research which make it difficult or impossible for him to deal with the states of consciousness embodied in serious art” (Smith 203). Cf. also Robert Spiller’s musings on the failure of an interdisciplinary seminar in his essay “Value and Method in American Studies: The Literary versus the Social Approach”: “The social scientist strives to isolate the social fact from its cause and its consequence so that it may stand up and be counted; and the literary critic strives to free the work of art from both intention and effect so that its supposed meaning may be read from its own being, the text, unconfused by what are considered to be extraneous circumstances. Not only is the artist once more being deliberately alienated from his society, but society is being deliberately robbed of its aesthetic experience” (21).

accepted as the basis of intellectual history that they shape the work of scholars of all political persuasions, from the left liberal progressiveist Vernon Louis Parrington, who focused on *Main Currents of American Thought*, to the liberal conservative Perry Miller who studied *The New England Mind*, from the liberal radical F.O. Matthiessen who wanted to describe the true spirit of American democracy in his seminal study *American Renaissance*,⁴ to such influential intellectual historians as John Higham or cultural historians like Warren Susman, who set out to determine the unifying principle that gave the Progressive Period, the Twenties, or the Thirties their distinctive character. In one way, the myth and symbol school rebelled against this tradition, but only on the basis of a metaphorically condensed Hegelianism: instead of studying the mind of a nation or region, for which Perry Miller still needed two packed volumes, it became now possible to understand a nation like the United States through one of its key myths or symbols. Again, the promise was not merely to provide an important insight, but a better, deeper understanding. In a key essay of disciplinary self-definition called "American Studies - A Defense of an Unscientific Method," the major theoretician of the myth and symbol school, Leo Marx, argued, for example, that the study of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* would provide deeper insights into America than any sociological study: "I would submit that the argument for the usefulness of *Moby-Dick* in the kind of inquiry I have described is identical with the argument for the intrinsic merit of *Moby-Dick* as a work of literature. It is useful for its satisfying power, its capacity to provide a coherent organization of thought and feeling, or in a word, for its compelling truth value" (89).

However, the essay by Leo Marx also highlights the main problem of Hegelianism which brings us to a second major stage in the self-legitimation of American literary studies. The problem of Hegelianism is how the representativeness of a literary work can be determined. After all, Hegelianism's whole reasoning depends on the assumption that the literary work is nationally and culturally representative. But how can we determine whether and to what extent a literary text is representative of a particular historical period or social formation? From a Hegelian perspective, the literary work should be put at the center of a humanistic education, because it expresses a deeper truth; it expresses a deeper truth, because it reflects and condenses the spirit of a historical or social formation. However, not every literary text can do this. Many texts, especially in the realm of popular culture, only blindly reproduce prevailing conventions or ideologies. Only the work of art can provide this kind of deeper insight. The question then is what a work of art is, and the Hegelian answer is circular at this point: art distinguishes itself from other texts and cultural objects, because it has successfully managed

⁴ There is some uncertainty whether Matthiessen should not be classified as a formalist. But in his study on *Cultural Authority in the Age of Whitman*, Günter Leypoldt claims correctly that "Matthiessen staged aesthetic excellence as a mark of cultural expressiveness, implying that the art of America's Whitman 'illuminates' its cultural essence better than the conventional writing of her Longfellows (that is, representatives of a second-order literature that merely 'reflects' contingent cultural surfaces)" (251).

to capture the spirit of a nation. In other words: the text itself cannot tell us whether and to what degree it is truly representative or not. In the final analysis, it is the critic or scholar who determines what counts as a deeper insight, and, as a rule, he or she will do this on the basis of already existing assumptions about what the deeper truth is, for example about America. One of the reasons for the longevity of Hegelianism is that it is a self-confirming system that can be easily used for positive self-definitions of a social formation (or, at the other end of the spectrum, for stinging critiques). Most myth and symbol scholars were left liberals, who used literature and its use of myth and symbol to argue against the threat of a materialistic, superficial, and conformist American consumer society. By doing this, they used the authority of the literary work of art for the confirmation of their own left liberal critique of America.

The Formalist Answer

When I began my studies in the early 1960s, intellectual history was already on the way out, however, not only because it works with sweeping generalizations about the national mind, but also because it easily lent itself to nationalist apologies. Thus, any alternative would have to meet two criteria: it would have to be less speculative, more firmly grounded in evidence, and it would have to be more resistant to ideological misuse, perhaps even provide an antidote to it. If one looks for an explanation for the almost complete dominance formalism had in literary studies for several decades, whether in the form of Russian formalism, Czech structuralism, American New Criticism, French "Explication de Texte," or German "werkimmanente Methode," then one answer is that formalism turned out to be the perfect counter-perspective to Hegelianism. Whereas Hegelian American Studies argues that the analysis of a literary work should focus on the national or regional spirit by which it is shaped, for formalists it is the work's artistic form that distinguishes it from other texts. Instead of relying on broad generalizations about the mind of a nation or region, only a close reading of a literary text's formal structure can therefore do justice to its meaning and cultural significance, and hence its specific value. Formalism therefore placed the legitimation of literary studies on a professional expertise that only experts, who had systematically studied literary form and linguistic expression, could apply competently. The interpreter was no longer an intellectual who indulged in large-scale generalizations, for example about America, but a trained professional who insisted on close readings as the only reliable source of insights. Close reading became an almost magic word, as if it could already in itself produce ideologically untainted knowledge that had been obscured before.

The basis for this shift lay in a redefinition of the field's function. Its importance, that is, the reason why it should be studied, did no longer lie in its national representativeness but in its aesthetic value. This aesthetic value seemed to exist independently from national or ideological content; in effect,